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ABSTRACT

This report is one of a series of papers presented to a continuing in-house seminar on learning sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The paper reports on several schools where writing and individual expression are valued, identifies one approach to the teaching of writing, and addresses two central questions underlying the crisis of writing in the United States: Is it important to write? And, if so, why don't we write? The first question is answered affirmatively in the first section of the paper with the reasons that writing contributes to intelligence, develops initiative, and is often the means to a personal breakthrough in learning. The second section of the paper discusses the second question and offers such reasons for our failure to write as inadequate preparation of teachers to teach writing and too little concern for the individual development of the learners themselves. The third section proposes the process-conference approach to teaching writing as a proven, workable way to reverse the decline of school writing. This method is described as one in which teachers help students by initiating brief, individual conferences during the process of writing, rather than by assigning topics in advance of writing and making extensive corrections after the writing is finished. (AEA)

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Papers on Research about Learning

BALANCE THE BASICS: LET THEM WRITE

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A Report to the Ford Foundation

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FOREWORD

How people learn is a subject of endless fascination, and scholars from many disciplines have applied themselves to it with enormous energy. Certainly there has been no dearth of research on learning. In recent years the federal government has underwritten a great deal of it, and the Ford Foundation, among other private groups, has supported various aspects--ranging from the investigations of Jean Piaget and his collaborators to studies at Rockefeller University of how individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds develop and apply various learning skills. But it became increasingly evident to us in the mid-1970s that there was only a weak connection between research on learning and efforts to improve schools and education. With the approval of our Board of Trustees we embarked on a modest effort to help advance understanding of the implications of research on learning - its processes and its findings - for educational planning, policy, and practice.

Since 1975, as part of this effort, we have been running an in-house seminar on learning. The main purpose of the seminar is to educate our staff about what is going on in research on learning and the degree to which the results of that research are being incorporated into educational policies and practices throughout the country. With that information as a base we felt we would be better prepared to develop a modest program of grants and related activities appropriate to the needs of educators and learners.

We have invited various researchers and practitioners to present papers to the seminar on issues related to learning and research about learning. Some of the papers have seemed to us to deserve a wider audience. One such study, which analyzed the

decline in test scores, was published by CEMREL, Inc. in 1976.*

We believe that the paper that follows, "Balance the Basics: Let Them Write," by Donald H. Graves of the University of New Hampshire, may also be useful to interested persons outside the Foundation. We are publishing this report as the first in what we hope will become a series of commentaries on aspects of research about learning in America today.

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It is no secret that a great many Americans, worried about how much and how well their children are learning, are clamoring for a "return to the basics." At the very least, they say, young people should be taught reading, writing, and arithmetic to the point where these skills are fully learned. To some extent the schools have responded, yet, as Mr. Graves points out, many schools are devoting most of their energies to reading improvement and mathematical competence. Writing, however "basic," is being given short shrift, almost as if it were a faddish innovation. Of course Graves is not arguing that writing should now be given preference and the other two subjects ignored, only that writing be given its due, that balance among the basics be restored.

He wants to ensure that the distinctive learning that goes on during the writing process be given a chance to flower.

*Harnischfeger, A., and Wiley, D., Achievement Test Score Decline: Do We Need to Worry? ML-Group for Policy Studies in Education, CEMREL, Inc., 3120 59th Street, St. Louis, Missouri, 63139, 1976, (Copies available for purchase through Cemrel, Inc.)

It is a provocative point, and Graves backs up his assertion with both evidence of its neglect and examples, drawn from research in the United States and Scotland, of the beneficial outcome when this aspect of learning is given attention. We think Mr. Graves' analysis will be of interest to parents as well as to educators and policy makers.

Edward J. Meade, Jr.
Education and Research Division
Ford Foundation

People want to write. The desire to express is relentless. People want others to know what they hold to be truthful. They need the sense of authority that goes with authorship. They need to detach themselves from experience and examine it by writing. Then they need to share what they have discovered through writing.

Yet most of us are writing less and less. Americans are writing fewer personal letters, and the U. S. Postal Service estimates an even lower volume in the years ahead.[1] Studies undertaken for this report show that people of many occupations and all educational levels turn to writing only as a last resort.[2]

When we do write, we often write badly. The press continually reminds us that students can no longer punctuate, use proper grammar, spell correctly, or write legibly. But the crisis in writing goes well beyond these visible signs. People do not see themselves as writers because they believe they have nothing to say that is of value or interest to others. They feel incompetent at conveying information through writing. Real writing, they seem to think, is reserved for the professional.

For the rest of us, writing is perceived as a form of etiquette in which care is taken to arrange words on paper to avoid error rather than communicate with clarity and vigor. When writing, Americans too often feel like the man who has been invited to a party of distinguished guests. Being a person of modest station he attends with great reluctance and discomfort. He has but one

aim--to be properly attired, demonstrate correct manners, say as little as possible, and leave early.

This view of writing was taught to us in school. In the classroom learners are viewed as receivers, not senders. A far greater premium is placed on students' ability to read and listen than on their ability to speak and write. In fact, writing is seldom encouraged and sometimes not permitted, from grade one through the university. Yet when studerts cannot write, they are robbed not only of a valuable tool for expression but of an important means of developing thinking and reading power as well.

The imbalance between sending and receiving should be anathema in a democracy. A democracy relies heavily on each individual's sense of voice, authority, and ability to communicate desires and information.

There is hope, however. Barriers to good writing are not as high or insurmountable as they seem. Students who write poorly can improve quickly with skilled, personal attention that concentrates on what they know and can tell others. Good teaching <u>does</u> produce good writing. There <u>are</u> schools where writing and expression are valued.

This study reports on several such schools and identifies one broad, flexible, and effective approach to the teaching of writing. It also addresses two central questions underlying the crisis of writing in America:

Is it important to write? And, if so, why don't we write?

I. WHY WRITING IS IMPORTANT

Writing is most important not as etiquette, not even as a tool, but as a contribution to the development of a person, no matter what that person's background and talents.

Writing contributes to intelligence. The work of psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists shows that writing is a highly complex act that demands the analysis and synthesis of many levels of thinking. Marcia, an eighth-grade student, has written a composition about handguns, a subject of her own choosing. She first became interested in the problems raised by handguns when a shooting occurred in the family of a friend. She knew the family, had seen the gun on an earlier occasion, had felt the shock of the incident, and had experienced with neighbors the emotions that surfaced in its aftermath.

To begin writing her composition, Marcia listed key words and details surrounding the incident: the expressions on the faces of her friends, the statements of neighbors, the appearance of the gun itself. As she set down these impressions she recalled details that otherwise would have escaped her. The process of writing heightened a remembered experience. It developed a way of seeing.

Later, Marcia found further material to add to her initial draft. She gathered general information on handguns, their use in robberies, their suitability for protection or for sport. She reviewed data on accidental shootings. Taking all this information, she analyzed and synthesized it through the process of writing.

In successive drafts, Marcia shaped her material into a structure that gave more meaning to the details. A sense of order and rightness came from the new arrangement. Through organization, the mass of data was simplified. This simplicity, in turn, made it possible for Marcia to stand back from her material to see new details and meanings, such as the evident concern of the police, the effect of the shooting on the family, and her own feelings.

What Marcia would have expressed orally at the time of the shooting was different from what she later developed on the page. Reflection and discovery through several drafts led to depths of perception not possible to reach through immediate conversation. Marcia now can say with authority why she has always opposed the sale of handguns. Through the successful analysis and synthesis of fact and feeling she has strengthened her cognitive abilities.

In addition to contributing to intelligence, writing develops initiative. In reading, everything is provided; the print waits on the page for the learner's action. In writing, the learner must supply everything: the right relationship between sounds and letters, the order of the letters and their form on the page, the topic of the writing, information, questions, answers, order.

Writing develops courage. Writers leave the shelter of anonymity and offer to public scrutiny their interior language, feelings, and thoughts. As one writer phrased it, "A writer is a person with his skin off."

There lie both the appeal and the threat of writing. Any writer can be deeply hurt. At no point is the learner more vulnerable than in writing. When a child writes, "My sister was hit by a terck yesterday" and the teacher's response is a red-circled "terck" with no further comment, educational standards may have been upheld, but the child will think twice before entering the writing process again. Inane and apathetic writing is often the writer's only means of self-protection.

On the other hand, writing, more than any other subject, can be the means to personal breakthrough in learning.[1] "I was astounded," a student reports, "when the teacher read one of my paragraphs in class. Until then I had no idea I could write or have anything to say. I began to think I could do something right for a change." Another says, "Writing for the school newspaper turned me around. Other people started reading my stuff and saying, 'Did

you really write that?'" This kind of discovery doesn't always happen in an English class. Another student observes, "I learned to write in a chemistry course in high school. The chemistry teacher was a stickler for accuracy and economy. Writing up lab reports was really disciplined writing. I began to see things differently."

Writing can contribute to reading from the first day a child enters school. Donald Durrell, a pioneer in the reading field and an authority for fifty years, strongly advocates the use of writing as a help to reading. "Writing is active; it involves the child; and doing is important," Durrell says. "Teachers make learning too passive. We have known for years the child's first urge is to write and not read and we haven't taken advantage of this fact. We have underestimated the power of the output languages like speaking and writing."[2]

Writing also contributes to reading because writing is the making of reading. When a child writes she has to know the sound-symbol relations inherent in reading. Auditory, visual, and kinesthetic systems are all at work when the child writes, and all contribute to greater skill in reading.

As children grow older, writing contributes strongly to reading comprehension. Students who do not write beyond the primary years lose an important tool for reading more difficult material.[3] Research has tied reading comprehension to the ability of students to combine sentences in writing. The ability to revise writing for greater power and economy is one of the higher forms of reading. Reading is even more active when a writer has to read and adjust his own ideas.

It is just beginning to be recognized that writing also contributes to learning in the field of mathematics. A great number of mathematics students consistently fail to solve problems

at the point of reading. Seldom are these students in the position of writing problems, or creating the reading of mathematics. Until they work "on the other side," at the point of formulating examples, they will not fully understand the reading contained in mathematics.

II. WHY DON'T WE WRITE?

Five-year-old Paul writes. Children want to write before they want to read. They are more fascinated by their own marks than by the marks of others. Young children leave their messages on refrigerators, wallpaper, moist windowpanes, sidewalks, and even on paper.

Six-year-old Paul doesn't write. He has gone to school to learn to read. Now that he is in school, the message is, "Read and listen; writing and expression can wait." Paul may wait a lifetime. The odds are that he will never be truly encouraged to express himself in writing.

Paul will wait and wait to write because a higher premium is placed on his ability to receive messages than on his ability to send them. Individual expression, particularly personal messages in writing, will not be valued as highly as the accurate repetition of the ideas of others, expressed in their writing. Since Paul will write so little, by the time he graduates from high school he will think of himself as a poor writer and will have a lowered sense of self-esteem as a learner. He will have lost an important means of thinking and will not have developed his ability to read critically. Worse, as a citizen, employee, and parent, he will tend to leave the formulation and expression of complicated ideas to others. And the "others" will be an ever decreasing group.

The recent national attention given to the weaknesses of American elementary education has not improved Paul's prospects. All signs point to less writing, not more. The so-called return to basics vaults over writing to the skills of penmanship, vocabulary, spelling, and usage that are thought necessary to precede composition. So much time is devoted to blocking and tackling drills that there is often no time to play the real game, writing.

The emphasis on before-writing skills may have the matter backward. When children write early, their experiments with sounds

and symbols produce spellings that may not be entirely accurate, but research shows that if these children continue to have ample opportunity to write they gradually increase in spelling power.[1] Moreover, it has been shown, the freedom to experiment with spelling (as with other aspects of writing) is important to the development of fluency and confidence.

Another reason that there will be less writing is that too often our schools show little concern for the individual development of the learners themselves or the important ideas they may have to share. Our distrust of children is most evident when we insist that they always be receivers rather than senders. If our approach to writing is to change, that change must be born of a confidence that what students have to say is worth saying. Writing is a matter of personal initiative. Teachers and parents must have confidence in that initiative or there will be little real writing.

The teaching of writing also suffers because reading dominates elementary education in America today. Nowhere else in the world does reading maintain such a hold on early learning. Although reading is valued in other countries, it is viewed more in the perspective of total communication.

Our anxiety about reading is a national neurosis. Where else in the world are children scrutinized for potential failure in a subject area in the first two months of school--or even before they enter school? And our worst worries are fulfilled. Children fail.

Concern about reading is today such a political, economic, and social force in American education that an imbalance in forms of communication is guaranteed from the start of a child's schooling. The momentum of this force is such that a public reexamination of early education is urgently needed. As we have seen, when writing is neglected, reading suffers. Neglect of a child's expression in writing limits the understanding the child gains from reading.

A review of public educational investment at all levels shows that for every dollar spent on teaching writing a hundred or more are spent on teaching reading. Of exemplary programs in language chosen for recognition by the U. S. Office of Education in 1976, forty-six were in reading, only seven included any writing objectives at all, and only one was designed for the specific development of writing abilities.[2]

Research on writing is decades behind that on reading. Research on all aspects of writing has produced only about as many studies as has research on the topic of reading readiness alone. A National Institute of Education analysis of research in basic skills does not even include writing in that category, mentioning only "reading and mathematical skills" as being required "for adequate functioning in society."[3]

Of research articles in education published in 1969, 5 percent were on reading; articles on writing were included in a category labeled "other," which constituted less than 1 per cent.[4] The U. S. Office of Education has published numerous studies to show the effectiveness of compensatory reading programs. Not one study has been published on writing programs.

Teacher-certification requirements also assure a continuing imbalance between reading and writing. Most states require one course in teaching reading, many require two, and some are attempting to raise the requirement to three. A survey of superintendents of schools in a New England state asked, "What should be the minimum standards or criteria used when interviewing candidates for a vacant position in the elementary years?"[5] Seventy-eight per cent of the superintendents thought that teachers should have had a minimum of three courses in the teaching of reading. No comparable criterion relating to the teaching of writing was felt necessary.

Publishers' investments in new language series have followed the research dollars and the wishes of school systems. Their

textbook lists directly reflect the one-sided emphasis on reading. More than 90 percent of instruction in the classroom is governed by textbooks and workbooks.[6] But only 10 to 15 percent of language-arts textbooks for children are devoted to writing. Most of the texts are dominated by exercises in grammar, punctuation, spelling, listening skills, and vocabulary development.

One textbook editor spoke for his profession when he said, "When writing is part of a reading series or when much writing is required, the materials won't sell. Teachers want more labor-saving devices, like easier scoring. If you have to respond to a lot of writing, there is more work involved. Some publishers have tried, and they have been hurt by their ventures."[7]

Even a casual survey of elementary-school workbooks shows that pupils are customarily required to circle, underline, or draw a line to identify correct answers. Rarely are they asked to respond in full sentences. In secondary schools and universities, students are asked more and more only to fill in squares with pencils for computer analysis. Examination essays are disappearing.

Thus, although writing is frequently extolled, worried over, and cited as a public priority, it is seldom practiced in schools. Orders for lined paper, principally used for writing compositions, are going down.[8]

In a recent survey a large sample of seventeen-year-olds were asked how much writing they had done in all their courses in the previous six weeks. The results: 50 percent had written only two or three pages, 12 percent had written only one short paper, and 13 percent had done no writing at all.[9] Thus only a quarter of the students had written anything more often than once every two weeks.

Even in school systems reputed to stress writing as a major concern, there is often little writing. A survey of three such systems discovered that children from the second through the sixth

grade on the average wrote only three pieces over a three-month period.[10] Even less writing was asked for at the secondary level. Yet if writing is taken seriously, three months should produce at least seventy-five pages of drafts by students in the high-school years.

The current emphasis on testing and documenting pupil progress makes writing a stumbling block. Writing resists quantitative testing. A sixth-grade teacher says, "I know why writing isn't emphasized more; it can't be tested. We are so hung up on reporting measured gains to the community on nationally normed tests that we ignore teaching those areas where it can't be done. How do you say, 'Susie has improved six months in the quality of her writing'? We test them to death in reading and math and do some assessing on language conventions, but that's all."

The demand for other evaluation of writing is also a deterrent to the teaching of writing. Evaluation is hard work. Most English teachers who take home a hundred compositions to mark feel they must meticulously review each word, make comments, and wrestle with a grade. Such work is exhausting, and not many English teachers have as few as a hundred students. This work is different from that of colleagues who score multiple-choice tests or run down the answer column on the right-hand side of a mathematics paper. Many teachers, knowing its importance, would like to offer more writing, but just don't have the time to correct papers as thoroughly as they think necessary. Research data now show, however, that scrupulous accounting for all errors in a student paper is actually harmful to good writing development (a point returned to in the next section).

As we have seen, few adults write. Teachers are no exception; they do not write either. Teachers report that they do not write because they don't like writing, feel they are poor writers, do not have time to write because of teaching demands, or do not

believe it necessary to practice writing in order to teach it.[11]

Seldom do people teach well what they do not practice themselves. It would be unheard of for teachers of music or art not to practice their craft. For some reason, the craft of writing is seen as an exception. What is not valued by teachers in their personal lives will not be introduced into the lives of children. It is therefore little wonder that writing is taught, if at all, as an afterthought, even when it is spoken of approvingly in public.

Most elementary-school teachers have not been prepared to teach writing. Even for teachers who want to get help, adequate courses in the teaching of writing are simply not available. A recent survey of education courses in 36 universities shows that 169 courses were offered in reading, 30 in children's literature, 21 in language arts, and only 2 in the teaching of writing.[12] Teachers do not teach a subject in which they feel unprepared, even when the subject is mandated by the school curriculum. Writing is such a subject.

The situation of teachers in secondary schools is no improvement. Those who were English majors in college are not trained for the teaching of writing. In colleges there is little formal attempt to teach writing beyond freshman English courses, although even in them the emphasis is on literature. There is little writing. Indeed, writing is given low priority in most English departments, and the teaching of it is often relegated entirely to graduate students and junior faculty members. At one large state university, the contract offered teaching assistants recommends that student assignments in the English writing course be limited to 7,500 words per semester, or about two typewritten pages weekly.[13] With this kind of university background, it is not surprising that most high-school English teachers would much rather teach literature than have anything to do with writing.

The writing achievements of high-school students reflect this attitude.

Writing models thus do not exist for most children, in school or out. Children may see adults read and certainly hear them speak, but rarely do they see adults write. And it is even less likely that they will actually observe how an adult composes. We know of the importance of models in reading and speaking. Although we have no good research data on how adult models affect children's writing, clear inferences can be drawn as warnings about the future of writing in America. Children begin to lose their natural urge to put their messages down in writing as soon as they begin to have a sense of audience, at eight or nine years of age. It is at this point that adults begin to have a strong influence as models. It is also the time when teachers' comments on children's papers begin to have an impact. This impact affects children for the rest of their lives.

Collages of haunting memories dominate the thinking of people from all walks of life as they recount learning experiences in writing: "There was something dark or sinister about it." "Be neat and tidy or you flunk." These are typical memories of children and housewives, businessmen and engineers, garage mechanics and laborers, teachers and politicians who were interviewed in the preparation of this report. For most people, the way in which they were taught has determined their view of writing and the degree to which they practice it.

Writing is a form of discipline, in the best sense of that word, that has been turned into a form of punishment. A castor-oil syndrome plagues writing from the first grade through the university: "It's good for you." Punishments in the form of compositions and mechanical writing exercises are still not uncommon in the classroom. "Write a hundred times, 'I will not chew gum in school.'" "Write a three-hundred-word composition on how you will try to improve your attitude." School discipline, grammar,

and spelling are often mentioned together as a single package containing what is most needed in education today.

In speaking critically of his early school experiences, a businessman says, "There was no emphasis on content in writing--they worried about grammar and spelling but not about what was said." The same person, asked about what is needed in education today, replies, "Today there is too much emphasis on whether or not the kids have a good time. When I was in school we were physically punished. It was a form of discipline. That's the biggest difference today--no discipline and not as much teaching of mechanics."

Parents often reflect this view that the mechanics of writing are more important than its content. In one suburban community, it was found, parents regularly checked their children's papers to make sure that teachers had identified all errors.[14]

Teachers' impressions of what constitutes effective teaching of writing are similar to those of the general public. As we have seen, neither the teachers of college courses nor their advanced professional training have aided them in teaching writing in any other way. They therefore teach as they were taught.

And so the links in the chain are forged. Seven-year-old children were asked, "What do you think a good writer needs to do in order to write well?" Children who had a difficult time with writing responded, "To be neat, space letters, spell good, and know words." Children who were more advanced in writing added, "Have a good title and a good ending." Children were also asked, "How does your teacher decide which papers are the good ones?" The following criteria were commonly cited by children of all ability levels: "It has to be long, not be messy, and have no mistakes."[15] In both cases, the children's impressions of what good writing demanded were connected with their teachers' corrections on their papers. And clearly, teachers did not tend to call attention to the content of the papers. Not once did

children speak of good writing as providing information of interest to others.

We persist in seeing writing as a method of moral development, not as an essential mode of communication. The eradication of error is more important than the encouragement of expression. Clearly underlying this attitude toward the teaching of writing is the belief that most people, and particularly students, have nothing of their own to say. And therefore, why should they write?

III. HOW WRITING CAN BE TAUGHT

A way of teaching writing called the process-conference approach is a proven, workable way to reverse the decline of writing in our schools.

Teachers using this method help students by initiating brief individual conferences during the process of writing, rather than by assigning topics in advance of writing and making extensive corrections after the writing is finished. Emphasis is given to the student's reasons for writing a particular composition. The teacher works with the student through a series of drafts, giving guidance appropriate to the stage through which the writer is passing. By putting ideas on paper the student first discovers what he or she knows and then is guided through repeated drafts that amplify and clarify until the topic is fully expressed. A single completed paper may require six or more conferences of from one to five minutes each.

The process-conference approach in a seventh-grade classroom might follow a script such as the following one. Notice that the teacher doesn't even review a draft until the fourth conference.

Conference 1

Jerry: I want to write about sharks but I have a hard time getting started. I'm not much of a writer.

Ms. Putnam: Well, have you had any experiences with sharks, Jerry? How did you get interested in the subject?

Jerry: Yeah, me and my dad were trolling for stripers and all of a sudden this fin pops up just when I got a hit. That was it. No more fishing that day. Can they move! I got to talking with the guys down at the dock; they said we've got more than usual this year. Blue sharks they were.

Ms. Putnam: You have a good start with what you have just told me. Many people talk about sharks but few have actually seen them. What else do people at the dock have to say about sharks? Any old-timers who might have had run-ins with them? You say the sharks moved quickly. Well, how fast can sharks swim?

Conference 2

Jerry: Hey, listen to this. Charley Robbins, the old lobsterman, saw a thirteen-foot blue, nudged his boat--didn't know whether he just got bumped or the shark intended to get him. Said he'd hit the bastard with a boat hook the next time he saw him.

Ms. Putnam: Well, do sharks attack or not? Have there ever been any shark attacks in this area? Do you think this is important information? Where can you find out?

Conference 3

Jerry: I asked at the newspaper and they didn't know of any shark attacks over the last five years. So, I asked them who might know. They said I ought to call the Coast Guard station. They said, no attacks but lots of sightings; they were more worried about people doing stupid things in their boats with this shark craze that's around.

Ms. Putnam: What do you mean, doing stupid things?

Jerry: Well, now when a beach gets closed, people stop swimming, but these crazy kids go out in small boats to harpoon them. They could get killed. Sharks really don't harm people, but if you start poking them, who knows what will happen?

Ms. Putnam: Jerry, you certainly have good information about sharks. I suspect that very few people know what the Coast Guard is up against. And what do you think will happen if some eighteen-year-old has to prove he's a man?

Conference 4

Jerry: Well, here's the first shot. What do you think?

Ms. Putnam: You have a good start, Jerry. Look at these first four paragraphs. Tell me which one makes you feel as if you were there.

Jerry: This one here, the fourth one, where I tell about two kids who are out trying to harpoon a shark.

Ms. Putnam: Don't you think this is the one that will interest readers most? Start right off with it. Hit 'em hard. This is an actual incident.

Conference 5

Jerry: I've got so much stuff on sharks I don't know what to do with it all. All those interviews and these books.

Ms. Putnam: You can't use it all, can you? I want you to put down the five most important things you want to leave your audience with. Don't look at your notes; just write them down off the top of your head. You know so much you don't have to look any more.

Conference 6

Jerry: Well, I took those five points. I feel better now. But look at all this stuff I haven't used.

Ms. Putnam: That's the way it is when you know a lot about a subject. Over here on the third page you get a little abstract about people's fear of sharks. Can you give some more examples? Did you get some in your interviews? What needs to be done before this becomes your final copy?

Jerry: Put in those examples of fear--I have plenty of those. I have plenty of weird spellings--guess I'd better check those out--never could punctuate very well.

Ms. Putnam: I think you have information here the newspaper or the Coast Guard might be interested in. Had you thought about that? Let me know what you want to do with this.

Most of Jerry's time was spent in gathering information from many sources to develop what he already knew. Without information a student has nothing to write about. This is why in three of the six conferences Jerry's teacher worked on developing information and strengthening the authority of the writer. Until students feel they have information to convey, it is difficult for them to care about writing or to feel they can speak directly and with authority. From the first wave of information a rough draft emerges. Succeeding drafts include more information, more precise language, and changes in organization.

Teachers who use the process-conference approach do not see a composition as something that can be "wrong." It can only be unfinished. The teacher leads the writer to discover new combinations of personal thought, to develop the sense of knowing and authority so valuable to any learner. Indeed, the main task of the teacher is to help students know what they know.

In a city school in upper New York state, children make reading for themselves and others. Each child maintains a folder in which writings are kept over a ten-day period. At the end of this period, the children are helped to evaluate their progress in writing. Sometimes a child and the teacher may agree that a very good piece of writing belongs in the class collection. Sometimes the children put their own writings into books that they construct themselves.[1]

When children are able to see their own writing used by others, their concepts of themselves as writers are heightened. When writing is not just a context between the child and the teacher but serves a broader audience, the teacher does not have to attend continually to correcting technical errors, but can concentrate on other matters essential to good writing.

As with older students, writing conferences are essential to the young child's growth as a writer. With younger children, per-

haps 90 percent of the conferences are only a minute in length, occurring throughout the day. A roving teacher in a second-grade classroom might teach like this: "And what are you writing now, Sandra? Oh, you're telling about prehistoric animals. Are there some words you will need for your word page? Some of those names are hard to spell. Now this is interesting, Derek. Which sentence do you think tells best about what racing cars look like?" Throughout, the teacher's questions are related to the message first and to the mechanics and finer points second.

The same method of teaching can apply with equal effectiveness to other kinds of classroom work: "What do you like best about the picture you're painting, Martha? Perhaps we could find the best part with these cropping Ls. What do you think?"

This teacher in this classroom was not dealing with either the initiation of compositions or their final evaluation. Rather, she was participating at points within the process where help counted most. With Sandra she was trying to find out how far her pupil was thinking ahead in the writing process. She asked Derek himself to choose the line that had the best imagery, at the same time letting him know she cared about his interests in cars. Although Martha was not writing, the teacher's attention to her composing with water colors was another way of helping the learner develop critical powers basic to both writing and painting--of finding a way of seeing and a way of looking for the best parts in a whole.

In a rural school in Connecticut where writing conferences were the norm, I asked Rebecca, a second-grade child who was about to write, "What does a good writer need to do well in order to write well?" Rebecca replied, "Details. You have to have details. For example if I walked down the street in the rain, I wouldn't say, 'I walked down the street and it was raining.' I would say, 'As I walked down the street in the rain, I sloshed through the puddles

and the mud splattered to make black polka dots on my white socks.'"

In this instance Rebecca demonstrated one of the important contributions of writing: heightened experience. Writing is a kind of photography with words. We take mental pictures of scenes when we're out walking but don't really know what we have seen until we develop the words on the page through writing. Rebecca noticed what happened when she walked through puddles with white socks on. Having written down what she saw, she will notice even more details the next time she walks in the rain.

In our conversation, Rebecca went on to show me in a book how another writer had used words to give the reader more details. Because of this child's confidence in her own writing voice, she could read the writing of others with a critical eye.

One of the common complaints of reading teachers is that children fail in the higher forms of comprehension: inferential and critical questions. It is difficult for many readers to separate their own thinking from that of the author, to stand far enough back from the material to see the author's point of view as distinct from their own. On the other hand, children who are used to writing for others achieve more easily the necessary objectivity for reading the work of others.

I wouldn't have expected to find process-conference teaching when I first looked in on a primary school in Scotland in which the rooms were formally arranged with neat rows of desks and chairs. However, teachers there were clearly well versed in the individual strengths of each child, even though there were thirty-five children to each room. It was obvious that high standards were set. I asked a child how he managed to write so well. His reply: "I am from Aberdeen, and this is the way we do it." Indeed, this spirit prevailed throughout the school. Children had a sense of voice and expressed themselves with confidence, both orally and in writing, as if it were their birthright.

Teachers in the Aberdeen school felt it was the children's responsibility to proofread their work. Few marks were seen on papers. A teacher would merely say, "But you're not finished yet, Matthew. You must be having an off day. Perhaps Margaret will look it over with you."

The process-conference approach flourishes in schools where administrators, teachers, and children trust one another. Such teaching cannot occur otherwise. Writing is affected by school climates. The stance of the school system as a whole shows quickly in the way writing is taught. A California teacher reported that her children were given four different tests for language skill. Four levels in the educational hierarchy--the federal granting agency, the state department of education, an independent community committee commissioned by the local board of education, and the school principal--all wished to know how her children compared with other children nationally. Although this program of testing took up valuable time, its other effects were greater: it created suspicion and fear that some children might lower the class scores, that other teachers' classes might do better, and that the test scores might be misused by administrators. Under these conditions the teachers inevitably became more concerned with the measurable surface elements of writing and less able to respond to the content of the writing of individual children. The teaching of writing was severely hampered.

School systems don't have to work this way. In a New Hampshire system, the teaching of writing turned around after the superintendent of schools enrolled, almost by accident, in a writing course given as an elective in an advanced program in school administration.

In the course, the teaching of writing was approached through the process of writing, not through reading about writing. As the superintendent gradually saw improvement in his own writing, he

saw what might be possible for teachers and students in his own system. He made arrangements for a cooperative venture in writing instruction between his school system and the local university. The university would work with teachers on the process-conference approach, and the school system would aid in the development of new procedures for the assessment of writing.

Working in the schools, university faculty members sought to help teachers discover the power of their own writing. The writing process itself was studied, as well as the use of the process-conference approach with students. Thirty teachers from grades one through twelve took part in the training sessions. And the professors, the superintendent and other administrators, and the teachers all wrote and shared their writing.

Once the teachers began to understand the writing process and their own powers as writers, they could develop an effective approach to assessing student writing. Together, a teacher and a student would choose the student's four best papers for assessment. Thus students were assessed at their points of strength, as they wrote on topics of their own choosing in a variety of genres.

In a school whose teachers follow the process-conference approach in teaching children to write, a teacher might think, "Jennifer is ready for quotation marks in her writing now." In a school that teaches to meet predetermined test-oriented standards for correct writing, a teacher would be more likely to think, "Paul had better get going on quotation marks or he'll pull us down in the next city-wide achievement test."

Jennifer will meet quotation marks when dealing with the conversation of characters in the story she is writing. She will also look at models from literature: "See, this is how this author shows that people are talking. You put your marks here and here. There, now you can show that this is your knight talking." Jennifer masters the conventions of language in the process of conveying information.

Paul is more likely to struggle with quotation marks as an isolated phenomenon. He will punctuate sentences provided for him in a workbook. He will not see himself as a sender of information, a writer.

Paul wanted to write before he went to school. He is less eager to write now.

Paul should write because it will develop his self-concept as a learner and his powers as a thinker. Writing will strengthen his work in other subjects. If he writes throughout his school years, he will later make more effective contributions as a citizen, parent, and worker.

Writing is the basic stuff of education. It has been sorely neglected in our schools. We have substituted the passive reception of information for the active expression of facts, ideas, and feelings. We now need to right the balance between sending and receiving. We need to let them write.

NOTES

1. "Americans are writing fewer personal letters..."
   "First Class Mail Volume Forecasts by Categories of Use, 1972, 1978 and 1983," RMC Research Corporation. Final Report UR-221, December 21, 1973.

2. "Studies undertaken for this report show that people of many occupations..."
   A series of 150 on-site personal interviews were conducted with persons from many occupations as well as professionals engaged in public and higher education. Questions related to individual reading and writing habits, views of education, and personal educational experiences were asked. Persons interviewed represented many levels of educational attainment from non-completion of high school to doctoral level and were from four different regions of the United States. Data for this portion of the study were cross-referenced by questions as well as used within the context of the entire interview itself. People were also interviewed in Scotland and England.

I. Why Writing Is Important

1. "On the other hand, writing, more than any other subject can be the means to personal breakthrough in learning."
   Data for this were taken from the interview responses about educational background and experiences. Although people cited writing most often as the personal breakthrough in learning, another group cited it as a negative, punishing experience. There seemed to be little middle ground in referring to writing experiences.

2. "Donald Durrell, a pioneer in the reading field for fifty years advocates..."
Although Durrell has stated this same point in recent writings, this is a quotation from an interview with him.

3. "Research has tied reading comprehension..."
This kind of research is in its infancy, yet early data returns are more than promising. These studies, as well as the Stotsky article, are important beginnings in portraying the contribution of writing to reading.

Combs, Warren E. "The Influence of Sentence-Combining Practice on Reading Ability." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1975.

Obenshain, Anne. "Effectiveness of the Precise Essay Question in Programming the Sequential Development of Written Composition Skills and the Simultaneous Development of Critical Reading Skills." Master's Thesis, George Washington University, 1971.

Smith, William. "The Effect of Transformed Syntactic Structures on Reading." Paper presented at the International Reading Association Conference, May, 1970.

Stotsky, Sandra L. "Sentence Combining as a Curricular Activity: Its Effect on Written Language Development and Reading Comprehension," Research in the Teaching of English, 9 (Spring, 1975) 30-70.

II. Why Don't We Write?

1. "When children write early, their experiments..."

Chomsky, Carol. "Beginning Reading Through Invented Spelling," Selected Papers from the 1973 New England

Kindergarten Conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Lesley College, 1973.

Chomsky, Carol. "Write First, Read Later," Childhood Education, 1971, 47 (No. 6), 296-299.

Paul, Rhea. "Invented Spelling in Kindergarten," Young Children, March, 1976, (No. 3), 195-200.

2. "Of exemplary programs in language..."

Educational Programs That Work, U. S. Office of Education (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C.) 1976.

3. "Research on all aspects of writing..."

1976 DATABOOK - The status of Education Research and Development in the United States, (The National Institute of Education: Washington, D. C.) 1976.

4. "Of research articles in education published in 1969..."

Persell, Carolyn, The Quality of Research on Education. (New York: Columbia University, Bureau of Applied Social Research) 1971.

5. "A survey of superintendents of schools in a New England state..."

A Survey of Current Instructional Practices in and Approaches to the Teaching of Reading/Language Arts in New Hampshire. (Division of Instruction: State Dept. of Education, Concord, NH) 1976.

6. "More than 90 percent of instruction in the classroom..."

"National Survey and Assessment of Instruction," Epiegram, 4 (April 15, 1976). (Published by Educational Products Information Exchange, New York City, New York).

7. "One textbook editor spoke for his profession..."

Interviews with both publishers and writers spoke of the risks of publishing. A number of publishers have gone back to publishing texts of ten to twenty years ago because of their stress on the basics, and the basics do not include actual writing.

8. "Orders for lined paper, principally used for writing compositions..."

Our surveys of school supply companies and the purchasing of paper by school districts show a decline in the use of lined paper. There is also an accelerated purchase of ditto paper, which is rarely used for writing.

9. "In a recent survey of a large sample of seventeen-year-olds..."

These data were cited by Rex Brown, Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado at the National Council of Teachers of English, Secondary School English Conference, Boston, Mass., April, 1976.

10. "A survey of three such systems discovered..."

As part of this study three systems in rural, suburban, and urban communities in three different states were examined. All three were making efforts to improve student writing.

11. "Teachers report that they do not write..."

Teachers from grade one through the university were interviewed. Individual writing was a universal problem.

12. "A recent survey of education courses in 36 universities..."

Our own survey of the catalog offerings in departments

of education in 36 universities. Most of the universities were state schools engaged in teacher preparation. In the 1960s the United States made an effort, through the National Defense Education Act, to better prepare teachers to teach writing. Since that time, however, the effort has languished.

13. "At one large state university, the contracts offered teaching assistants..."

This was a contract recently agreed upon at a Big Ten university in freshman composition.

14. "In one surburban community, it was found, parents regularly checked children's papers..."

This was a common concern of teachers surveyed in a surburban school system near Boston, Massachusetts.

15. "Seven-year-old children were asked, 'What do you think a good writer needs...'"

Graves, Donald H. "Children's Writing: Research Directions and Hypotheses Based Upon an Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven-Year-Old Children." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, SUNY at Buffalo, 1973.

III. How Writing Can Be Taught

"In a city school in upper New York state..."

The examples that follow in this section were from schools in four regions of the U. S. These schools were visited to provide contrast and perspective on the status of writing in the U. S. As mentioned earlier schools were also visited in England and Scotland.